

“She asked about...”

FORGIVENESS IN ISLAM

By

Hassan Hathout, MD, PhD



The Hassan Hathout Legacy Foundation

Mission: To spread the message of love in God through the works and spirit of Hassan Hathout for the betterment of humanity.

The Hassan Hathout Legacy Foundation, an educational 501(c)(3) nonprofit public benefit corporation, was founded after Hassan Hathout's death in 2009 as the exclusive caretaker of the diverse and sizeable body of work produced by Hassan Hathout, MD, PhD, FRCOG, FRCSE, FACS in the fields of academic medicine and medical ethics, humanities, theology, the Abrahamic faiths, Islam and its ethics, interfaith dialogue, literature and poetry.

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Preface

She asked about forgiveness in Islam:

“ Dear Dr. Hathout,

We are putting together a précis about the place of forgiveness in different religions. We found adequate resources about Judaism and Christianity, but it seems that we need some help about Islam. Would you be kind enough to write a brief essay about the subject?”

She sounded sincere and far from derisive, and was apologetic about the short notice, as we were asked to fax her some material within a few days.

That was the background that prompted the writing of this essay. This incident triggered a few ideas:

First, Islam is still largely unknown in the United States (or largely known for what it is not). Our friend who sent the letter is involved in religious studies and interfaith activities; in her congregation she is considered a religious scholar (sort of). It was surprising to find such an educated person at a loss in connecting forgiveness and Islam.

Second, reflecting on where to put the blame for this situation, we find it unfair to direct our fingers at non-Muslims and resign ourselves to the idea that the world discriminates against us. Negative images of Islam in school books, in the general press and the informational and recreational media influence people's attitude towards Muslims. We ought to realize that if we were in their place we would have derived the same conclusions and acquired the same indignation.

But now, with several million Muslim Americans, we should fulfill our responsibility of making Islam known to others for what it is and replacing myths with reality.

Third, we should be aware that people tend to read Islam not in the Quran or the Islamic books but in the behaviour of Muslims who are known to them or in the news (political or otherwise) about what are traditionally called "Muslim Lands."

Every religion (including Islam) suffers from the dichotomy that exists in the behaviour of its followers and its teachings. There are individuals in each religious community who defy the religious teachings and regulations. It is a pity and an injustice that their actions are erroneously ascribed to the religion they follow (more precisely, don't follow).

We must admit that some of us-Muslim leaders, politicians, fanatics, wealthy people, secularists or just ignorant people or groups- have contributed to the bad image of Islam in the West. Their image tends to eclipse the majority of Islam-abiding Muslims. They catch the lime-light in the media that have a voracious appetite for sensationalism and inflammation.

We submit this pamphlet as a reminder, and an aid to personal education to help convey some aspects of Islam to non-Muslim friends.

Introduction

Islam is the last of the monotheistic Abrahamic religions. It recognizes and respects its predecessors namely Judaism and Christianity. Jews and Christians have the honorary title of "the People of the Book," as fellow believers in the One God and the recipients of His Scriptures (Torah and Gospel). There are doctrinal differences within the unity of the Abrahamic faith.

The Arabic name of God is Allah (the word used even by Christian and Jewish Arabs), and God's attributes are His names. These include names, such as, The Forgiver, The Pardoner, The All-Forgiving, The Forbearing, The Acceptor of Repentance, The Merciful, The Compassionate and The Loving.

The Quran, the book that Muslims believe to be the very word of God conveyed to Muhammad, is in its original text word to word and letter to letter. It is replete with verses that emphasize the limitless forgiveness of God, urging the believers to exercise the virtue of forgiveness, and reminding them that proven forgivers are the first to deserve forgiveness.

Islamic Teachings

The teachings of Prophet Muhammad and the Quran together form the source of Islamic morals and laws and are known as the Sharia. They are rich in emphasizing the importance of forgiveness as a value and as a way of life.

God's forgiveness to human beings is an axial issue in the relation between the two. Human beings were not programmed to respond in a certain way to the events within and around them. Uniquely, the human race is endowed with built-in perpetual knowledge. Its potential lies in its awareness of the idea of good and evil, in making choices between them and in being accountable for their choices. Human beings are not perfect nor were they meant to be. They lead a life of continuous decision making and choice between evil temptations and good that can be very taxing.

To pass the accountability test, no one could rely on a perfect record as human beings' full hope is in God's grace, mercy and forgiveness.

Since Muslims do not subscribe to the idea of a chosen race, and since they believe that accountability is personal and therefore not atoned by vicarious sacrifice by having anyone slain in prepayment for their sins, salvation to them entirely focuses on the Forgiving God.

God, the Ultimate Mercy

According to Prophet Muhammad, "If you were not a creature who would sin, repent, ask forgiveness and be granted it, God would have created another being who would sin, repent, seek forgiveness and, is granted it." In a '*hadith Qudsi*' (words of God, reported by Muhammad, but not part of the Quran), God says: "O child of Adam, while you call upon Me, and ask of Me, I shall forgive you for what you have done, and I shall not mind. O child of Adam, were your sins to reach the clouds of the sky and were you then to ask forgiveness of Me, I would forgive you. O child of Adam, were you to come to Me with sins nearly as great as the earth and were you then to face Me, ascribing no partner to Me, I would bring you forgiveness nearly as great as the earth."

In Islam God is the absolutely just, also the absolutely Merciful and Forgiving. A Muslim asks of God to deal with him with His forgiveness and not His justice, a hope that is supported by the saying of Prophet Muhammad: "When God decreed the creation, He pledged Himself by writing in His book that is laid down with Him: My mercy prevails over My wrath."

Justice

Islam, however, ascribes to God - and none but Him - full authority to decide the matter of justice versus forgiveness, and no one is permitted to decree or predict who is destined for either. No one is allowed to set conditions or put restrictions on God's forgiveness or play a special role in granting or denying it. The idea of excommunication or of granting indulgences is completely alien to Islam, a religion that is characteristically void of the establishment of a religious hierarchy or the institution of a clergy.

Prophet Muhammad taught in one of his traditions: "A man said: By God, God will not forgive so-and-so. At this, God the Almighty said: Who is he who swears by Me that I will not

forgive so-and-so? Verily, I have forgiven so-and-so and have nullified your (own good) deeds." The committing of even the most heinous sins should not lead the sinner to despair of God's forgiveness.

God says in the Quran:

وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَدْعُونَ بِمَعَ الْلَّهِ إِلَّا نَهَاءَ أَخْرَ وَلَا يَقْتُلُونَ النَّفَسَ الْقِحَّرَ
اللَّهُ أَلَا بِالْحَقِّ وَلَا يَرْثُونَ وَمَنْ يَفْعَلْ ذَلِكَ يَلْقَ أَنَّامًا ٦٨

يُصْنَعَ لَهُ الْعَذَابُ يَوْمَ الْقِيَمَةِ وَخَلْدٌ فِيهِ مَهَانًا ٦٩

إِلَّا مَنْ تَابَ وَأَمْنَ وَعَمِلَ عَمَلًا صَنِيلًا حَافَّا فَأَتَتْهُكَ مُبَدِّلُ اللَّهِ
سَيِّئَاتِهِمْ حَسَنَتْ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَّحِيمًا ٧٠

"Those who invoke not with God any other god, nor slay such life as God has made sacred except for the pursuit of justice, nor commit fornication;- and any that does this (not only) meets punishment (but) the chastisement on the Day of Judgment will be doubled to him (or her) and he will dwell therein in ignominy, except whoever repents, believes and does righteous deeds, for God will change the evil of such persons into good, and God is Oft-Forgiving Most-Merciful." Quran (25:68-70)

Nor is God's forgiveness, according to Islam, exclusive upon religious lines. God says in the Quran:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ مَاءَمَنُوا وَالَّذِينَ هَادُوا وَالنَّصَارَى وَالصَّابِرِينَ مَنْ
مَاءَمَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمَ الْآخِرِ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلَهُمْ أَجْرُهُمْ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ
وَلَا حَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزُنُونَ ﴿٦٢﴾

"Those who believe (in the Quran), and those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians, and the Sabians, any who believe in God and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve." Quran (2:62)

Even beyond these circles, the Quran says:

مَنْ عَمِلَ صَالِحًا مِنْ ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنْثَى وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَلَنُحْكِمَنَّ
حَيَاةً طَيِّبَةً وَلَنَجْزِيَنَّهُمْ أَجْرَهُمْ بِأَحْسَنِ مَا كَانُوا
يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

"Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has faith, verily We will give a life that is good and pure, and We will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their actions." Quran (16:97)

Human Nature

Forgiveness as an interhuman ethic is a mandatory value and an important virtue. Common sense tells us that the more people are guided by their forgiving nature the happier they are, whether at the individual, familial, social, national or international level. Islam emphasizes forgiveness and enjoins on its followers to be forgiving for as much as they yearn to be forgiven.

Abu Bakr, the first Caliph, had a relative called Mistah whom he used to support financially by way of charity. A sad incident happened when a group of hypocrites, including Mistah, plotted to spread rumors to tarnish the reputation and honor of Ayesha, daughter of Abu Bakr and wife of Prophet Muhammad. A psychological crisis afflicted the Prophet, his wife, her father and the Muslim community. Some six weeks later a Quranic verse was revealed exonerating Ayesha to the relief of all concerned. A "natural" response of Abu Bakr was to suspend his financial support to Mistah in view of the latter's evil action.

Yet a while later the Prophet called Abu Bakr to tell him that a verse was revealed against his punitive attitude, as God said in the Quran: *"Let not those among you who are endowed with grace and amplitude of means resolve by oath against helping their kinsmen, those in want, and those who have left their homes in God's cause. Let them forgive and overlook.... Do you not wish that God should forgive you? For God is Oft Forgiving, Most Merciful."* Quran (24:22)

Abu Bakr immediately resumed his favor upon Mistah.

Endurance

In the early days of his prophethood, Muhammad and his followers endured fierce oppression by the enemies of the new religion. In one instance they threw stones at him and as he sat desolate tending to his bleeding wounds, Angel Gabriel visited him with greetings from the Lord and an offer - if Muhammad so wished to cause the mountains to crumble over his enemies' heads, to which the Prophet answered: "Leave me alone, Gabriel!"

May it please You Lord to forgive my people: for they do not know."

The following years saw more persecution and killing of Muslims and a plot over the life of Prophet Muhammad, making it necessary to migrate from Makka to Medina where Islam was fulfilled as a Muslim community and a state. After a lengthy conflict it was then the turn of the Muslims to enter Makka with an overwhelming army to purify the Mosque of Abraham from the idols. As his staunch enemies of yesterday stood in surrender awaiting his verdict over them, Muhammad declared general amnesty and addressed them saying: "You may go. You are a free people!" It was this behavior of forgiveness that won all that community to Islam, a feat that could have never been achieved by pressure or coercion, which in anyway would have conflicted with the Quranic injunction: "*There is no compulsion in religion...*" (Quran 2: 256). The Quran incessantly reminds Muslims of the importance of forgiveness.

"Those who avoid the greater sins and indecencies; and when they are angry even then forgive," (Quran 42: 37) is one description of the truly faithful. *"Kind words and forgiving of faults are better than charity followed by insult."* (Quran 2:263)

Islam and Other Religions

Even the heated theological debate that was inevitable between Islam and the followers of the previous religions whom the Quran accused of certain misdeeds, was never allowed to be a justification for compromising on forgiveness:

"But because of their breach of their covenant, We cursed them and made their hearts grow hard: they change the words from their (right) places and forget a good part of the message that was sent them... nor will you cease to see them - except a few - ever bent on (new) deceipts: BUT FORGIVE THEM AND OVERLOOK THEIR MISDEEDS, for God loves those who are kind." (Quran 5:13)

Islam is a religion with both a moral code and a legal system. Even though both are necessary and complementary, their tenets naturally may not always coincide. To make the point, consider the saying of Jesus: "Whoever smites you on your right cheek, then turn to him the left cheek also." Although this is the moral epic in forgiveness and nobility, it cannot be made into a law by which courts would rule! Islam brings forth the law to ensure justice and fair dealing, and no human society can dispense with the law.

Islam emphasizes that justice is not the supreme target, and that whoever can secure justice but opts to transcend it to forgiveness is more virtuous, nobler and nearer to God:

وَلَئِنْ عَاقَبْتُمْ فَمَعَاقِبُهُ يُمِثِّلُ مَا عُوْقِبْتُمْ بِهِ، وَلَئِنْ صَرَّّتُمْ لَهُوَ

خَيْرٌ لِلصَّابِرِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

"And if you punish, let your punishment be proportionate to the wrong that has been done to you: But if you bear yourselves with patience it is indeed far better for those who are patient."
Quran (16:126)

وَجَرَرُوا سَيِّئَةً مِّثْلَهَا فَمَنْ عَفَّا وَأَصْلَحَ فَأَجْرَهُ اللَّهُ أَنَّمَا لَا
يُحِبُّ الظَّالِمِينَ

"The recompense for an injury is an injury equal thereto, but whoever forgives and makes reconciliation, his reward is due from God, for God loves not evil doers." (Quran: 42:40)

Conclusion

The injunctions of Prophet Muhammad on forgiveness are plenty. The Prophet once asked angel Gabriel who answered him: "Your Lord commands you to forgive those who harm you, pardon those who deny you and visit those who sever their relations with you." The Prophet taught: "Whoever would be happy to have an honorable abode and a superior rating, let him forgive them who harmed him (or her), pardon those who ostracized him and give to those who denied him."

He also said: "I can swear on three matters: no wealth is undermined by giving for charity; the more a person is forgiving the more dignity he (or, she) attains; and the more a person is humble the higher his rank is raised."

Such are the features of the righteous, whom the Quran describes as:

الَّذِينَ يُنفِعُونَ فِي السَّرَّاءِ وَالضَّرَاءِ وَالْكَاظِمِينَ الْفَحْشَاءِ
وَالْعَافِينَ عَنِ النَّاسِ وَاللَّهُ يُحِبُّ الْمُحْسِنِينَ

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"Those who spend (freely) whether in prosperity or in adversity, who restrain anger, and who forgive (all) people, for God loves those who do good."
Quran (3:134)



Hassan Hathout, a Muslim multi-cultural physician and bilingual poet, was born in Egypt on December 23, 1924. Renowned for his scientific talent, universal leadership, and profound spirituality, he was able to compose an internationally successful career in academic medicine, ethics, and theology. Dr. Hassan Hathout received his postgraduate training at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland where he earned the degrees of Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons, Fellow of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, and Doctorate of

Philosophy. Subsequent affiliations included Fellowship of the American College of Surgeons, International Federation of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, and the World Health Organization Committee for Medical Ethics. Together with being a Medical School Professor and Department Chair, he was co-founder of the International Organization of Medical Sciences and the Interfaith Council of Southern California, as well as a strong supporter of the Interfaith Center to Reverse the Arms Race. Hassan Hathout was the keynote speaker at the first National Muslim Eid celebration at the White House in 1998. Additionally, he was the recipient of many interfaith and humanitarian awards including the American Friends Service Olive Branch award, and the Initiatives of Change Life Changer award. He was author of numerous books including: *The Spirit of the Red Cross in the Teachings of Islam*, *The Humane Physician*, *Reading the Muslim Mind*, *Thus Shall I Stand before God*, and *Audible Silence*. His beautiful poems include: *The Migration*, *In the Hands of the Prophet*, and *Jesus, the Son of Man*. For his last twenty years, he lived in Pasadena where he passed away on April 25, 2009. In June of the same year, the Hassan Hathout Legacy Foundation was formed as a California-based 501(c) (3) independent nonprofit educational organization with the mission of spreading the message of 'Love in God' through the works and spirit of Hassan Hathout for the betterment of humanity. (For further information visit: www.HassanHathoutLegacy.org)